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**Someone Telling Something to Someone about Something: Stories in Olive Schreiner’s  
Letters and Nella Last’s Diary**

*Andrea Salter*

**Stories and Their Tellings**

Stories are a familiar feature of everyday life, told in different situations for various purposes and are complicated social phenomena. They operate at a discursive level, providing ‘accounts of puzzling, unexpected, dramatic, problematic, or exemplary events’ (Tilly 2006: 64), and also form a key part of all documents of life. The stories told in life documents are my main concern. Plummer (2001: 41) suggests that once stories ‘are seen as topics, a whole new set of self-conscious questions about the[ir] construction, organization and reception...comes into play.’ In line with this and in discussing ‘the sociology of storytelling,’ Polletta et al. (2011: 110) argue that sociologists have ‘treated stories more as texts to be analysed for the meanings they express than as social performances that are interactively constructed.’ The questions Plummer raises provide guidance on this: ‘just why and how people come to tell their stories (or don’t), why and how they assume the forms that they do, what happens to them once told, and how they connect to the life being told’ (Plummer 2001: 42). This chapter responds by discussing my work on stories in two kinds of documents of life – letters and diaries – in which I explore some ideas for identifying and understanding

stories drawn from Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, specifically from his chapter 'Story Time' (Certeau 1984: 77–90).

The discussion focuses mainly on stories in letters, specifically those written by South African feminist writer and social theorist Olive Schreiner (1855–1920, and see [www.oliveschreinerletters.ed.ac.uk](http://www.oliveschreinerletters.ed.ac.uk)). There are circa 4,800 extant Schreiner letters, written between 1871 and 1920, with addressees including family members, close friends, political associates and organisations, and wider feminist and other network members. Identifying stories across the Schreiner letters is not a straight-forward task because of the scale of the data as well as because what a story “is,” is complicated (Davis 2002), including because the terms narrative and story are often used interchangeably (Stanley 2010: 2–3). Certeau's (1984: 77–90) approach uses a simple framework for distinguishing stories around three broad ideas: (i) a story is a spatial and temporal practice which is part of a situation or context and cannot be sensibly removed from this; (ii) a story makes a ‘coup’ or achieves a point, including by utilising metaphorical aspects to accomplish this; and, (iii) on being told, a story ‘disappears’ into its own action, with its end – the achievement of its coup – vanishing the story itself. In other words, the metaphorical point of a story comes to stand for *the story itself*.

Keeping these ideas in mind, what follows first outlines the broad structure of stories identified across Schreiner's extant letters using Certeau's framework and comments on the methodological implications. Then, different examples of stories in Schreiner's letters are discussed in order to point up some features of her epistolary story-telling. The chapter also briefly discusses stories in my earlier work on women's wartime diaries written for the radical social research organisation Mass Observation (Salter 2008a, 2008b, 2010), and concludes with a short discussion on stories in the documents of life more broadly.

### **Stories Across Schreiner's Letters**

Around 97 stories can be discerned in Schreiner's extant letters when putting Certeau's framework into practice. However, this count is not hard science, for deploying Certeau's apparently simple framework revealed tricky complexities, with some of what I initially treated as Schreiner stories hard to pin down in these terms. As a result, there were several rounds of narrowing down what I considered a story to "be" as I operationalized the framework. This involved excluding stories that Schreiner started, stopped and excised (OS to Betty Molteno, 25 January 1904, [Olive Schreiner BC16/Box3/Fold3/1904/6](#)), and her mentions of story-telling where no story was actually told, some of which I initially termed 'promised' stories which will be told on another occasion (e.g. OS to Alice Greene, 27 August 1904, [Olive Schreiner BC16/Box3/Fold3/1904/45](#)) or 'held back' stories which someone else will tell (e.g. OS to Will Schreiner, 8 June 1911, [Olive Schreiner BC16/Box4/Fold4/1911/28](#)).

This identification of around 97 stories across Schreiner's extant letters also accommodates Certeau's differentiation of story from the term narrative in the loose formless way the latter is often used. For Certeau, stories are textually-contingent, bounded practices around their three distinguishing features; and this means they can therefore be sensibly compared across examples (Stanley 2008). My work maintains the story/narrative distinction, which has involved prising apart the stories Schreiner wrote, and the stories that I began to piece together and infer. As a consequence, I revised my thinking around what I earlier called promised and held back stories, recognising these as analytical impositions and not part of Schreiner's practice but mine.

I also tightened my identification of stories in a related way. While many of Schreiner's letters contain powerful narratives including about nature, landscapes and social episodes, most of these do not invoke metaphorical points but remain almost entirely descriptive and in Certeau's terms do not fulfil all the criteria for "a story" as such. Also,

there are various instances where Schreiner tells the part-plot of a novel or other piece of creative writing to a letter addressee (e.g. to Havelock Ellis, Karl Pearson, Constance Lytton and W.T. Stead), and while I considered excluding these, they have been retained because they evoke strong metaphorical aspects in the making of their coups and so plausibly ‘count’ as stories in Certeau’s terms.

As a result of trying out Certeau’s framework, around 34 or so of Schreiner’s addressees received stories in her letters to them, with this by no means evenly distributed across addressees. Schreiner seems, if the extant letters are a guide, to have written no stories at all to the majority of her addressees, suggesting that the stories she did write had communicative functions within particular epistolary relationships, a point I return to later.

Looking across the 97 stories identified in more detail, there seems to be five related structural dimensions to them which help delineate Schreiner’s epistolary story-telling, as she articulates them in particular ways according to who she is writing to. Firstly, there are “situations” and “occasionings” of Schreiner’s stories regarding particular real-world circumstances, around which a story forms part or whole, centre-piece or (seeming) digression, in the letters they appear in. Secondly, the kind of coup which the story makes is important, that is, whether it concerns politics, personal friendship, or something else. Thirdly, the kind of coup made cannot be separated from the kind of epistolary action the story performs, for example, whether it entertains or challenges, and the rhetorical devices involved in achieving this. Fourthly, some of Schreiner’s stories require “beyond the letter” understanding, so for these (and perhaps others) understanding the wider context is important. Fifthly, different kinds of time utilisations, temporal removes and ‘punctual acts of memory’ (Certeau 1984: 85) are involved in Schreiner’s story-telling and this is modulated according to the addressees of her letters.

So what does the idea of a coup to a passage in a Schreiner letter and other aspects of the five structural dimensions of Schreiner's epistolary story-telling look like in some examples?

### **Some Epistolary Stories**

In a formally-written June 1912 letter to Sir Patrick Duncan, a member of the Union Parliament of South Africa, Schreiner commented on reading an Act of Parliament which Duncan had sent her regarding a South African military defence force. This featured an entertaining if rather obvious moral story or parable about having once given a knife to her young nephew, who wielded it mischievously:

When I was living in England I once gave a little nephew of mine a large four bladed clasp knife.

When I next went down to Eastbourne I found he in terrible disgrace. He had cut the benches in the hot-house, & chipped the window ~~set~~ of his bedroom, & actually cut his name in some furniture. When I began to sermonize him, he drew himself up in a very aggrieved way, & said, "Well but, Auntie, you gave it me!"

Moral: don't give sharp knives to little boys who can have nothing but evil to do with them!

(OS to Patrick Duncan, 27 June 1912, [Patrick Duncan BC 294/D1.33.2](#))

This story invokes in a rather folksy way Schreiner's past experience, and is an act of memory which bears on the wider political context with which the letter is concerned. It might be seen as used to lighten the situation, which it is, but it is also the centre-piece of the letter with its very explicit moral coup warning Duncan about not giving people the means to cause destruction. The wider context is of Schreiner sounding out whether she could work with Duncan politically. Indeed, the three extant letters to him (May and June 1912, and September 1913) concern the wider political situation in South Africa so this specific story needs to be read as part of this wider context and making its coup concerning this.

Context is also important to a story that Schreiner wrote in a 30 May 1899 letter to Alfred Milner, at that time Governor of the Cape Colony and High Commissioner for South Africa. The letter (one of four extant which she wrote him) opens with her ‘begging’ Milner to read ‘a rough printers proof’ (OS to Betty Molteno, 31 May 1899, [Olive Schreiner BC16/Box2/Fold1/Jan-June1899/24](#)) of an anti-war pamphlet she had written, later extended and published as *An English South African’s View of the Situation* (Schreiner 1899), to convince him of the dangers of British war-mongering against Kruger’s Transvaal (Stanley and Dampier 2012; Stanley et al. 2012b). The letter was sent by Schreiner with a copy of the pamphlet to Milner (OS to Betty Molteno, 31 May 1899, [Olive Schreiner BC16/Box2/Fold1/Jan-June1899/24](#)) for him to read before meeting with Kruger in Bloemfontein, brokered by President Steyn of the Orange Free State and the Cape Government (Davenport and Saunders 2000: 222). The pamphlet, the letter and the story it contains were, then, timely.

The story also invokes belonging and roots. Alluding to the plight of the Boer Republic against imperialist capitalist expansionism, it also invokes the idea of origins:

Can you understand my position – it is that of many others? We are like a man born in a log cabin, who afterwards goes to live in a palace, & all his affections & interest centre in the palace. But one day he finds the ~~the~~ palace is beginning to oppress the cabin, & then he says, “I belong to the cabin.” – but he loves the palace still.

(OS to Alfred Milner, 30 May 1899, [Milner Papers, dep. 209, ff. 278-280](#))

Here the textual coup is less obvious than the ‘Moral’ of her letter to Duncan. The story appears at the very end of the letter, after Schreiner has signed-off, and so it is its ‘last word’ literally. Just before the sign-off, however, and very much framing the story is the striking comment that ‘I do not ask you to forgive my writing to you because there are times when a man has a right to do almost anything.’ (lines 12–13). Flouting epistolary etiquette and invoking a male and universalised persona, Schreiner strongly emphasises ‘the

times' as legitimating the letter and indeed 'almost anything' to change Milner's mind and prevent war.

The explicit coups of Schreiner's stories to Patrick Duncan and Alfred Milner are markedly different from that appearing, or rather *not* appearing, in her 13 February 1887 letter to her close friend Havelock Ellis ([HRC/CAT/OS/4a-iii](#)), a writer and sexologist. In this, Schreiner outlines the story of her allegory 'I am an artist,' but leaves the story unfinished, writing 'Can you see how it goes!' (line 34). This requires Ellis to infer the story's point and hence relies on, and in a way explicitly presumes through the use of an exclamation mark, a shared understanding with Schreiner; the off-page coup links artistic creativity with non-sexual love, which directly connects to issues at the heart of Schreiner's troubled relationship with the Men and Women's Club as well as to intellectual and personal concerns she shared with Ellis at the time. Her 13 February 1887 letter goes on to explain in detail how and why Schreiner broke with the Men and Women's Club, specifically around an exchange of letters with Karl Pearson, Elizabeth Cobb and Bryan Donkin, and her 14 December 1886 letter to Pearson ([Karl Pearson 840/4/3/157-159](#)) addresses this matter too; see also her 31 January 1887 letter to Ellis ([HRC/CAT/OS/4a-ii](#)) and other letters to him between November 1886 and 1888.

A more complicated example of a story appears in a letter from Schreiner to her long-term close friend, Alice Greene, a former teacher at the Port Elizabeth School for Girls. It concerns an amusing incident involving Schreiner's household meerkats during a visit from a Dutch Reform Church parson:

...I must tell you something which happened the other day. I have only had two visitors since I came back from Cape Town, the one was the Dutch Church Parson, Fouché who called for the first time since he was here. He was very properly dressed in a long black coat & a white tie, he was sitting at the table drinking a cup of tea, when In-bred-sin, who is not accustomed to see strangers in the house, rushed out of his box in the corner where he was with the little ones



[meerkat babies] & made an attack on him trying to bite at his trousers,.... Then Tommy & Arriet jumped out of the box & began prancing about ^too^, you know they way they do, not trying to bit him, but just showing off. The Parson jumped up from his chair & began springing from one leg to the other, he's a very big ~~strong~~ stout young man, as In-bred darted at him. I to make matters better caught up a news paper & shook it at In-bred to make him go back into the box. This put him so beside him self that he rushed under my dress & caught me in the ankle. I gave a scream & a bound & jumped onto the middle of the dining room table, when I looked round Fouche was dashing around with his coat tails flying & In-bred-sin after him. I laughed so much at first I couldn't get off the table, but at last I got down & drove them all off to their box, but I don't think the poor young parson will come here again for a long time! You have to forgive In-bred, because of his ~~pass~~ passionate devotion to the little ones. Now I think I've told you all the news.

(OS to Alice Greene, 14 October 1904, [Olive Schreiner BC16/Box3/Fold3/1904/50](#))

Prefaced as a precise act of memory – ‘I must tell you something which happened the other day...’ – this story is fast-paced, full of movement and engaging. Its core is a comical high, yet its end and its beginning invoke Schreiner's isolation and that even the few visitors she has may not return. Schreiner's comment on In-bred-sin's paternal devotion contrasts with this, with the story showing how the meerkats look after each other. The complex implicit other metaphorical point involves Schreiner telling the story to Greene at the particular time she did: the beginning of the letter explains that it was written while Greene and her partner Betty Molteno were travelling to England around the death of Greene's mother, with the entertaining story responding to this by providing a moment of amusement for Greene, a kind gesture which Schreiner deepens in emotive power by comparing her own father's death earlier in the letter (lines 15–18). The story's wider metaphorical point, then, concerns the importance of social care and bonds of affection, with the care of animals for each other providing a blue-print for this but in a funny example.

The personal preferences of Greene as addressee are also taken into account by Schreiner in order to further bespoke the story. Earlier in the letter, for instance, she compliments Greene's own power of description, consequently making her own story a response to this, as also descriptive and engaging in terms she knows Greene will appreciate: land, scenery, animals, being shared interests frequently commented on across the many extant letters to Greene. Overall, such story-tailoring provides clues regarding what Schreiner considered an appropriate way to engage with Greene, and therefore about the terms of their relationship.

These examples suggest that Schreiner's epistolary stories relate to specific real-world contexts; appear at particular junctures in her epistolary exchanges; make explicit or implicit coups, according to her relationship to whom she is writing; and perform different kinds of action to do this, including warn, challenge and entertain, with different temporal acts of memory involved. It is consequently clearly important to recognise that Schreiner's letters, including the stories they contain, were written always with an addressee in mind, and that this influenced how the five structural dimensions of stories based on Certeau's ideas play out.

Regarding this, Schreiner's stories in her letters to Duncan and Milner, for instance, were prompted by and a response to the wider political situations at the time of writing, hence require understanding of these circumstances to make sense of the stories, and importantly connect to Schreiner's recognition of the roles these men might play in influencing the outcome of these situations. The stories warn and challenge, in the case of Duncan's story drawing on a personal memory and in Milner's using a kind of conditional tense, with both invoking more-or-less directly-made coups and deploying temporality as appropriate to the coups apparently striven for.

However, the stories written in letters to her close friends Ellis and Greene are somewhat different, occasioned by happenings at a more personal level and responding to a more complex and already fairly developed ‘epistolary pact’ (Altman 1982, Stanley et al. 2012a), which with Ellis was based on sharing a close friendship in which work, love and life were discussed in a highly entwined way, and with Greene was based on one in which personal support and mutual delight in the natural world were key, and these matters are reflected in the concerns of the stories Schreiner writes about as well as in how they are written. In both cases the stories are entertaining, timely and evocative of personal circumstances, and they work on multiple metaphorical levels (highly implicit in Ellis’s case); they also require “beyond the letter” understanding which rests not on knowledge of broad political circumstances, as with the stories to Duncan and Milner, but instead connects to an implicit recognition of the parameters of their personal relationship and hence what to expect in terms of shared “off-page” understanding.

Thinking about the stories written in letters as complex phenomena intricately but variably adapted to prospective readers and contexts of writing raises questions about how stories might be used in other kinds of documents of life, and I turn to consider this with regards to diaries next.

### **Stories in Letters, Stories in Diaries...**

Diaries are written with some kind of generalised reader in mind, even if the diarist themselves. But this is not the same, as with letters, as having a particular addressee to whom it is written. However, Mass Observation’s organisational context (Sheridan et al. 2000), and its solicitation of wartime diaries to be written for the duration as a key component of its research activities meant that these actually had “letter-like” characteristics (Salter 2008b), because the diarists posted their entries in instalments and received occasional general communications from MO staff (Sheridan 1990). Having their MO diaries read formed part

of the organisational relationship the wartime diarists had signed up for with MO (Salter 2008b), yet there was a minimal sense of individual response, and while a few MO diarists wrote occasionally of being kept to hear back from MO, the large majority of the 80 (of 242 in total) women's diaries I researched did not explicitly comment about this. Seriality and turn-taking strongly structures letter-writing (Stanley 2004, 2011), but is barely present in the case of the MO diaries. With diaries, even in this case of diaries which are rather letter-like, there is something about the relationship with a reader or readers which bears on how stories are told, as I now discuss.

Nella Last's manuscript MO diary (1939–66) features many narrative episodes and descriptions of events. How Last tells stories in Certeau's sense remains remarkably constant across the 27 years she wrote for MO, involving temporal markers and formulaic narrative sequencing (Salter 2008b, 2010), which is rather different from Schreiner modulating her story-telling around her relationships with particular addressees and their circumstances at a particular point in time. Also, when Last's stories do make coups, they are mainly made explicitly in the diary. An example here is a story in a 5 November 1939 diary-entry about the annual party she organised on Guy Fawkes Day and comments on the previous year's event. Last initiates the story with seeing a 'picture in the fire of other Nov 5th days,' an opening device she frequently used; and she closes it by noting what became of some of the 'young things' who had attended the 1938 party. This top-and-tailing has in between detailed description of sharing food, fireworks and community spirit, and its coup explicitly evokes the 'hell broth' of the Second World War by contrasting this with the earlier carefree fun time of 'other Nov. 5th. Days' (D 5353, diary, 5 November 1939).

Less than a week later, on Britain's annual commemorative Armistice Day, Last wrote another story. It concerns her many years before telling her eldest son Arthur a story and being interrupted by news the Great War had ended, and then:

... Arthur clutched his old horse & his big brown eyes looked up at me and I explained the War was over. He pondered for awhile & then asked seriously ‘where has it gone to – for it must have gone somewhere Mom!’ If I had looked ahead for 21 years I could have said ‘It’s gone away to get stronger & crueller & then take your little brother who is not even born yet!’

(D 5353, diary, 11 November 1939)

The story is about Last’s unhappiness at her younger son Cliff being called-up for military service and, while the story is about happenings at different points of temporal remove from the moment of writing the entry, its coup actually concerns the “time of writing” situation of the war. The volunteer diarists had signed-up to record ‘everything that happened to them, the conversations they heard and took part in, their general routine of life, and the impact of the war on it’ (Willcock 1943: 450). While writing diary entries in accordance is not surprising during the war years, what *is* surprising is that Last’s story-telling in her post-war diary through to the 1960s continued to be done in similar terms. In December 1964, for instance, following an execution for murder, but before the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965 came into effect, Last wrote a story which reflected on finding out that Cliff was wounded in November 1944, commented on the views of wartime colleagues about capital punishment, and using them both to say something about her own moral standpoint:

I never believed in capital punishment, & a little personal experience once, convinced me more of the futility of ‘revenge’. We got a cable one Saturday to say that Cliff was seriously wounded.... Tues I went as usual to Hospital Supply...Mrs Wood, a tall majestic type always held the theory that ‘when we win the war its our duty to stamp out the German race, they are a menace’ etc & was vexed when we all didn’t agree,...I said ‘ah no Woody, I must push away all hurtful, negative thoughts, & try & send my poor lad comfort & love & healing ones!...One day Mrs Higham said ‘don’t say you aren’t a Christian, thought & prayer can be one.’

(D 5353, diary, 23 December 1964)

Many of the stories in Last's diary refer to earlier times, but her uses of memory seem to rest on the initial set of terms she accepted from MO, and this is very different from Schreiner's epistolary story-telling, which she shapes according to her changing relationships with her different addressees and changes over time. Last's stories are not all the same, but her story-telling indicates she had a more static point of connection with the organisational reader of her MO diary, and this affected the structure of her story-telling. In diaries generally, stories elucidate a point the diarist wants to make at the time of writing, and are modulated to a kind of 'model reader' (Eco 1981: 7). In the case of Last's MO diary, the shaping of her story-tellings in the way I have discussed is clearly responsive in more specific terms to *Mass Observation* as the entity for which these are written. But this entity is a kind of unchanging edifice, and so the static aspects I have noted.

Thinking about stories and story-telling in the precise way using Certeau's framework requires suggests there are some important differences between telling stories in letters, and telling them in diaries, regarding the more, or less, dialogical aspects of these different kinds of documents of life. Succinctly, while, as Plummer (2001: 54) indicates, life documents are 'interactive product[s],' they are not all interactive in the same way or to the same extent.

### **Stories and Documents of Life**

While documents of life share some broad characteristics, there are differences which can be thought about productively by focusing on how stories are told in them. With letters, while recognising the porosity of the boundaries around what a letter may be (Stanley et al. 2012a), generally they can be understood as a kind of life document which are perspectival (like diaries and indeed all other documents of life) but which importantly are also markedly dialogical, involving sequence, and also seriality and reciprocity, as well as having emergent properties (Stanley 2004, 2011) in the sense that they develop their own 'temporally-

emergent epistolary dialogics and ethics' (Jolly and Stanley 2005: 104), which depend on the relationship between writer and reader and the context of writing.

It is these particular characteristics which signal the key differences between letters and other kinds of documents of life, even those which also involve strong dialogical dimensions, including turn-taking, such as some interviews or other oral accounts. This is because such dimensions add up to more in the sense that they construct the representation of "a life" in a particular kind of way; that is, in letters as documents of life, life is not a singular, static, one-sided entity, but rather dialogically-constructed at the intersection where the perspective of the writer and the anticipated perspective of the reader meet.

Stories are particularly interesting because they are situated at, and thus can help illuminate, this intersection. In other words, they represent a point or instance at which life and writing, context and text come together and so following Certeau by not collapsing story into narrative means that stories appearing in different documents of life can be compared across examples and thus explored as form-specific or form-adaptive phenomena.

From my initial work along these lines, story-telling in the case of Schreiner's letters seems to vary according to recipient, being tailored in a pronounced way to the context of the particular epistolary exchange, always with a firm view about what this might achieve in the world beyond the letter, whether this is in terms of emotional support (such as with Greene) or broader political matters (such as with Duncan and Milner). The MO diary of Nella Last, however, constructs a temporally- and thus contextually-static reader, which suggests stories might differ in other kinds of documents of life too, including around the construction of the reader. It is plausible, for instance, that stories in autobiography, memoir, testimony or biography will similarly construct a rather static sense of a reader because they are written as part of telling a wider story, a life story, or rather a narrative of a life or lives to draw back to Certeau, and so are in a sense *about* the telling of stories in the context of that life, rather than

actually telling the story to a person at the time to accomplish something extra-textual. In other words, these kinds of life documents are generally more after-the-fact, more about interpretation than practice, and while letters are of course not immediate in any easy sense, they are more demonstrably responsive to issues taking place at the time of writing, with stories sitting at the crux of this.

Capacious understandings of what a story can be and using the term interchangeably with narrative does not enable serious investigation of these interesting matters, however. Indeed, my discussion here has suggested that there is much use in exploring story as a precise, discernable phenomenon with specific contextual moorings and a specific purpose or purposes, which is rather unlike Kearney's (2002: 5) loose conceptualisation used in this Chapter's title. And examining stories in this precise way, then, shows up the importance of thinking about forms of story-telling across the documents of life more broadly.

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